Tela Araneae. 1824. ND9

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a good experimental essay, proving fully the total inactivity of the article — in intermit — & as an anodyne — in large doses — ☞ publish

☞ bad spelling

An
Experimental inquiry
into
the Medicinal Powers
of
the Tela Araneae
By
George D. Prescly
of
South Carolina

Passed March 8th 1824
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Experiments on the Tela Araneæ

There has been, for a considerable time past, a sort of popular tone of confidence reposed in the Medicinal powers of the spider's web. The question however not being decided in the minds of practitioners, I thought it not less instructive than important to endeavour, if possible, by some experiments to satisfy myself, in relation to this unsettled inquiry.

After perusing Dr Robert Jackson's detailed account of the cob-web, in which such high encomiums are lavished upon it, and which are to a certain extent corroborated by the concurrent testimony of some of the most experienced practitioners. I was not a little prepossessed in favour of this article, and disposed to consider it as a valuable acquisition in the list of our remedial resources

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the difficulty they so often experience in the cure of Intermittent fever, by the ordinary modes of treatment recommended in that disease, I was not a little surprised, that they never resorted to the cob-web, since Dr Robert Jackson positively pronounces it as preventing the recurrence of the febrile paroxysms of Intermittent fever, more speedily and more effectually than bark, arsenic, or any other remedy employed for that purpose. To me it appeared evident, that this neglect could not arise from any scarcity of the article, or difficulty in procuring it, since its very plentiful distribution, even within the precincts of the meanest cottage, renders it accessible to every one who will take the pains to collect it, Nor yet from any disagreeable or deleterious effects arising from its use, since, it is said to operate by producing feelings of delight and pleasure rather than pain and suffering

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The hilarity and delightful state of feeling, arising from the administration of this remedy, have even been associated by some with the sensations arising from a draught of the Nitrous Oxide gas. From this view of the article, it would appear to have a specific mode of action in the cure of disease, peculiar to itself, and giving it a decided preference to most articles in the Materia Medica; as the Modus Operandi of most medicines, perhaps, I might make no exception, at least the primary effects produced, is a sense of nausea sickness, or disorder, in some, according to the nature of the article administered, instead of animation and cheerfulness.

To satisfy myself as to the real merits of the Spiders-web, I commenced my experiments in a system of health [illegible], where the functions were unembarrassed by diseased associations, and

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subsequently by administering it in a system morbidly disturbed by diseased associations.

To guard against any defect in the web I took the precaution to select it myself. I procured a small quantity which I considered, from the directions upon the subject, to be the best. I collected in a dark cellar, that which was the production of the black spider, and after forming it into pills, which was effected with facility by adding to the mass a little mucilage of Gum Arabic, I commenced by taking three grains myself, waiting for near fifty minutes without any perceivable alteration in my pulse or state of feeling; I took five grains more, and in a few minutes repeated the dose; I had now taken thirteen grains, and not observing the slightest effect I at once began to suspect that I had been deceived in procuring the genuine species of the web.

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Getting intelligence of an apothecary who had been accustomed to prepare the vet, and who was well acquainted with the best kind, I called, upon him and requested him to prepare me some. He accordingly did so, and assured me that he gave me the genuine species, which assertion from the appearance of the vet proved I thought was correct. I was now confident in my own mind that I should experience some very decided effect from its use. My stomach being empty, I took four grains which I repeated very frequently, until in the space of two hours, I had taken near forty grains. I examined my pulse frequently but there was not the least variation, either in my pulse or general feeling. My astonishment was now not a little excited and I began for the first time very strongly to suspect the Medicinal powers of the article; still I was far from being willing to proscribe our medicine as destitute of

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any virtue, as medicines operate very differently in opposite states of the animal economy, more especially in a system, where instead of the regular movements of health, perverted and morbidly deranged associations have taken the sway.

As the powers of the cobweb have been more especially extolled in the cure of Intermittent fever. I now felt very anxious to test its powers in that particular disease. Dr Samuel Jackson, one of the attending physicians in the Philadelphia Almshouse, very politely let me have the management of some of his patients, and on these patients I commenced its use.

Case 1st Intermittent fever, of the tertian type, of recent standing. The patient was ordered an emetic, and after the operation of which, his tongue being clean and free from any sickness of stomach, I thought the case fair for the use of the spiders-web.

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I administered one scruple every four hours during the intermission, and continued this course for six days, but without the slightest advantage. The chills returned as regularly as they had previously done, every other day, and with rather increasing vigorance.

Case 2nd Intermittent fever of the quotidian type. I first prescribed an Emetic, and after the complete evacuation of the contents of the stomach, I gave the web. Twenty grains every four hours was regularly administered during the intermission. I persisted in its use for near a week, yet still the paroxysms recurred every day with their usual regularity.

Case 3, Intermittent fever of the quotidian form, The stomach and alimentary canal being thoroughly evacuated of their contents, by an Emetic and cathartic, I commenced the use of the cob-web, in the same doses as in the preceding

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cases. I continued its use for five days, but had not the fortune to make the least impression upon the disease.

In one of these cases, I gave the nut in four grain doses every hour, and I anticipated the recurrence of the paroxysm, by augmenting the quantity considerably, but still it proved infinitely too feeble. In each of these cases I paid particular attention to the pulse, and frequently interogated my patients in respect to their feelings. I could, however, perceive little or no variation in the pulse, nor were they sensible of any change of feeling.

The exhilaration of spirits, sparkling eye, and temporary animation of countenance, described by Dr Robert Jackson, if present in my patients, entirely eluded my observation. The secretion of the kidneys, I could not perceive to be either increased or diminished, the surface was not more

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relaxed than usual, and the sweating stage was not prolonged, or the perspirable fluid rendered by any means, preternaturally copious. I was also particularly attentive in watching if it had any soporific tendency, but I could not discover that my patients inclined to sleep, any more than other patients in the same ward

After the use of this medicine for two or three days, one of my patients complained of uneasy sensations in his stomach, but this I was inclined to suspect was only imaginary, or a pretext to prevail upon me to discontinue its use, as he had lost confidence in the medicine, and wished to take something else

It perhaps may be thought strange, that I should commence with so large a dose of the medicine, inasmuch, as the quantity usually recommended does not accede five or six grains every fourth or fifth hour. But, as I had previou

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-ely taken it myself, to a considerable extent, in a short time, I was confident no deleterious consequences could be apprehended from the quantity given; and besides I was anxious if there was any virtue in the article it was necessary to make such an impression on the system, as to check the disease in its birth. That my bolus use of the medicine did not produce any over degree of action is obvious, inasmuch as the pulse and feelings of the patients were not affected

As the nux has been recommended as a substitute for Opium, and even been considered as superior to that invaluable article, in calming the turbulence and irritability of the frame, where the nervous system is much affected, and in restoring tranquillity and sweet repose for restless and sleepless nights, I thought it important to try its powers in some cases of this description. In the mind in which I

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attended, there were two cases, which I was inclined to suppose might obtain great relief from this medicine, if the above views were correct. One of these patients was a middle aged man, a convalescent from Dysentery, but who, from some disturbance, particulary of his nervous system, could not sleep any through the night. I gave him near forty grains of the cob- web in the evening, but in the morning I was disapp- -ointed, after enquiring, to find that he did not get any rest. The subsequent night, the medicine was repeated, though not to the same amount, yet still without the slightest advantage.

The other case, was a man of about thirty five, a convalescent from Rheumatism, and who was affected with symptoms very analagous to the preceding case. I gave him a scruple of the web at night, and this affording no relief, it was repeated the subsequent evening, but my patient still remained a stranger to nature's sweet restorer

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It may be proper here to state that those cases of Intermittent, in which the spiders-web was used with no effect, were completely cured very soon after it was discontinued by a preparation of the bark.

That patients labouring under Intermittent fever have recovered while under the use of the cob-web, testimony of the highest character, has most unquestionably shown; but does it hence necessarily follow, that these cures were affected by any Medicinal powers, inherent in the article? To me this appears extremely problematical. With a mind most unquestionably free from the least semblance of prejudice I commenced my experiments, which were conducted with all possible fairness, and candour, and the result of which has been to give it a very equivocal share of confidence at least in my mind. The Yela Arnica is an article which I cannot but conclude, will be found entirely too

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feeble to arrest the febrile paroxysms, even of a common Intermittent fever. After the authority of such a man as the learned and experienced Jackson, it may no doubt be deemed the breathings of an imagination bordering upon insanity, for a youth, who has never entered upon the duties of his profession, to represent the article in this a light. But, as we have remedies of known and tried powers, I must consider the man who pertinaciously persists in the use of this article to the exclusion of all others, to be sporting with the health and even life of his patients. Though Intermittent fever in itself is not generally considered of any very serious import, yet, when neglected, or ill managed, it so prostrates and paralyzes the energies of the constitution, as to pave the way for the most obstinate diseases. For instance, what physician of ordinary experience has not traced an Ulcer in the lungs a Hydropic diathesis, a

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schirrhous Liver, an indurated Spleen to neglected or ill treated Intermittent? In the language of a distinguished physician "Let respicere finem be the motto of every indisposition"

Inasmuch as I could not affect a single cure, it may be asked, in what manner I am to explain its modus operandi in those cases reported to have been cured by its use? To me this appears by no means unintelligible. May it not operate entirely by the strong sensations produced on the mind, as so disgusting a remedy? In confirmation of this suggestion which may, no doubt be considered as wholly gratuitous, who has not heard of the paroxysms of Intermittent fever being completely suspended by sudden passions or emotions of the mind, as joy, surprise, anger, or even extreme solicitude Nothing is more common I have been informed in some parts of the world

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as a remedy in Intermittent, than the use of some species of insect; This is swallowed by the credulous sufferer an hour or perhaps a shorter period before the recurrence of the expected paroxysm, which it entirely prevents.

In the mind of every true and worthy physician there must be diffused a feeling of sympathy for the sufferings incident to the feeble constitution of our species, together with a correspondent zeal and determined resolution to call to his aid in combatting disease, in all its direful shapes and features, all the means and those only, to which the test of experience has given the stamp of utility. In the bosom of such a physician there must exist a latent spark of genuine love, which must burst into a flame of ecstacy and joy, at the expulsion of an article, which has so long been imposed on the credulity of the profession.

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A Dissertation